

we of old Europe have fared very badly

Wednesday, March 12, 1828

“Man’s nature contains some wonderful powers,” said Goethe, “and it has something good in store for us just when we are the least hopeful.—There have been times in my life when I fell asleep with tears in my eyes, but then in my dreams the loveliest figures came to comfort me and to make me happy, and the next morning I got up refreshed and felt happy again.

“We of old Europe have all on the whole fared very badly; our circumstances are much too artificial and complicated, our food and way of life is unnatural, and our social intercourse lacks real love and good will.—Everyone is polite and cultivated, but nobody has the courage to be good-natured and sincere, so that an honest person with natural inclinations and sentiments is in a very bad position. One would often wish to have been born on one of the South Sea Islands as a so-called savage, just in order to enjoy for once human existence in its pure state without artificial flavor.

“When in a depressed mood, one thinks deeply about the misery of the times, it often seems that the world is gradually becoming ripe for doomsday. And the ills and evils accumulate from generation to generation!—For it is not enough that we must suffer from the sins of our fathers; we increase those inherited defects by our own and pass them on to our descendants.”

make the rounds with another diable boiteux

“Such thoughts often pass through my mind,” I said, “but then I see some regiment of German dragoons riding by, and I ponder the strength of the young people, and that comforts me somewhat, and I tell myself that, in the long run, mankind is not really so badly off.”

“It is true,” answered Goethe, “that our peasants have consistently retained their vigor, and it is to be hoped that for a long time to come they will not only continue to be able to supply us with proficient horsemen but will also safeguard us against total ruin and decay. They may be regarded as a depot from which the vigor of declining humanity is forever replenished and revived.—But just visit our large cities, and you will have different feelings. Make the rounds with another *diable boiteux*, or a physician with an extensive practice, and he will whisper to you such stories that you will be alarmed by the misery and amazed by the maladies which afflict human nature and to which society is subject.

“But let us dismiss from our minds such hypochondriac thoughts.—How are you? What have you accomplished? What else have you been doing today?”

“In Sterne,” I replied, “I have read how Yorick wanders about the streets of Paris and notices that every tenth man is a dwarf. I just thought of that when you mentioned the maladies of a great city. I also remember seeing a battalion of French infantry during the time of Napoleon which consisted of nothing but Parisians; they were all so small and puny that it was hard to understand what might be accomplished with them in times of war.”

“The Highlanders under the Duke of Wellington, I suppose, were heroes of a different sort,” said Goethe.

"I saw them in Brussels one year before the Battle of Waterloo," I replied. "Those were truly splendid men! All strong, vigorous and agile, like God's first creations. They all carried their heads so freely and joyfully and moved along so lightly with their powerful bare calves, that it seemed as though for them there were no original sin and no ancestral defects."

"It is a singular thing," answered Goethe, "—be it a matter of the blood, the earth, the free constitution, or the healthy upbringing—the English in general seem to have something that puts them ahead of many others.—Now here in Weimar we see only a few of them, and these are probably by no means the best, but what capable, attractive people they all are! And no matter how young and adolescent they may be when they arrive, they do not in the least feel alien and self-conscious in this alien Germany; on the contrary, in their appearance and their behavior in society they are much at ease and full of confidence as though they were the masters and the world belonged to them. That is precisely what makes them so appealing to our women and enables them to wreak such havoc in the hearts of our damsels. As a German householder who has the peace of his family close at heart, I often feel a slight shudder when my daughter-in-law informs me that again one of those islanders is about to arrive. Forthwith I see the tears which some day will be shed at his departure. They are dangerous young people, but indeed, their virtue lies in the very fact that they are dangerous."

"Still, I would not say," I replied, "that our young Englishmen here in Weimar are any more intelligent, witty, erudite, and genuine than the rest."

"Those are not the things that count, my friend," an-

everything is calculated to tame sweet youth

swered Goethe. "Nor are birth and wealth. What counts is the fact that they have the courage to be what nature fashioned them to be. There is nothing spoiled or distorted about them; there is no perversity or superficiality in them. Instead they are always complete human beings, no matter what else they may be. On occasion they are complete fools; I admit that wholeheartedly, but even that is something, it does carry some weight in the scales of Nature.

"The happiness of personal freedom, the consciousness of the English name and of the prestige it enjoys throughout the rest of the world—these things are an advantage already for the children, so that in the family as well as in the institutions of learning they are treated with far more respect and enjoy a far freer, happier development than we Germans do.

"In our dear Weimar I need but look out of the window to see how things are with us.—Recently, when there was snow on the ground, and the neighborhood children wanted to try out their sleds in the street, right away a policeman was on the spot, and I saw the poor little things run away as fast as they could. Now that the spring sun lures them from their homes, and they would like to play one of their innocent little games with other children in front of their doors, I can always see how shy and timid they feel, as though they were not quite safe and feared the approach of some despotic bearer of police authority.—No sooner does a boy crack a whip, or sing, or shout, than the police arrive to forbid it. With us everything is calculated to tame sweet youth early and to drive out everything natural, original, and wild, so that in the end nothing is left but the Philistine.

“As you know, hardly a day goes by when I am not visited by a stranger from other parts. But I would be lying if I said that I derive great pleasure from seeing these visitors in person, especially when they are young German scholars coming from a certain northeasterly direction.—Near-sighted, pale, sunken-chested, young without youth: that is the picture of most of them as they present themselves to me. And when I allow myself to be drawn into a conversation with them, I immediately notice that the things which are enjoyed by the like of me seem futile and trivial to them; that they are completely wrapped up in ideas and that only the highest problems of speculation are fit to attract their interest. Of healthy senses or sensuous joys there is in them no trace; all youthful feeling and youthful desire has been driven out of them, irretrievably so, for if a man is not young when he is twenty, how can he be young when he is forty!”

Goethe sighed and was silent.

I thought about the happy times of the last century when Goethe was young; I felt in my spirit the summer air of Sesenheim, and I reminded him of the lines:

Afternoons we young folk sat in the shade
together.

(*Nachmittage saßen wir junges Volk im Kühlen.*)

“Ah!” sighed Goethe, “those were beautiful times!—But let us keep them out of our minds, so that the gray foggy days of the present do not become completely unbearable to us.”

“We need a second Saviour,” I said, “to lift away our discontent and the monstrous pressure of our current conditions.”

“If He were to come,” answered Goethe, “He would

be crucified a second time. But we do not really need so great a thing. If the Germans—following the English example—could be taught less philosophy and more energy, less theory and more practice, a goodly portion of salvation would fall to our lot without our having to wait for the appearance of the personal majesty of a second Christ. A great deal could be accomplished from below, by the people, through schools and home training; a great deal from above, by the rulers and those close to them.

“This is also the reason I cannot sanction the excessive demands for theoretical knowledge that are made upon the future public servants during their study, for through those demands the young people are spiritually as well as physically ruined before their time. When they embark upon their careers of practical service, they do possess an enormous stock of philosophical and learned supplies, but these cannot be utilized in the limited sphere of their profession and must be forgotten as useless. On the other hand, they have failed to get what they need the most: they lack the spiritual and physical energy which is so necessary a requirement in practical service.

“And then! In the life of a public servant who must deal with people, are not love and well-wishing indispensable ingredients too?—But how is someone to wish others well and act accordingly when he senses no well-being within himself?

“But all those people are full of ill-feeling. One third of the scholars and of the public servants who are tied to their desks are physically impaired and in the clutches of the demon hypochondria. Here those in

power should intervene, so that at least future generations can be saved from similar ruin.

"Meanwhile," Goethe added smilingly, "we must hope and wait and see how things turn out here in Germany in about a century and whether by then we shall have managed to be human beings instead of abstract philosophers and scholars."